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A RECENTLY DISCOVERED INSCRIBED SABEAN BRONZE PLAQUE FROM MAḤRAM BILQĪS NEAR MĀRIB, YEMEN*

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THE American Foundation for the Study of Man recently completed its fourth season at Maḥram Bilqīs, a Sabean sanctuary near Mārib in the Republic of Yemen.[1] An inscribed bronze plaque was one of the major discoveries of the season. The plaque appeared at the top of an archaeological layer that dates to the third century A.D., and it seems to have been attached or fixed to a wall or a pillar, as suggested by the presence of seven small holes bored through the margins of the plaque. Iron nails used to affix such bronze plaques or tablets have been discovered in situ in several walls and pillars inside the sacred area of Maḥram Bilqīs. A few nails of this kind also appear in the walls of what appear to be several different structures just northwest of the peristyle hall, near the discovery spot of the plaque itself. Although these extramural structures belong to the first three centuries A.D.,[2] roughly contemporary with the deposits containing the plaque, the bronze plaque probably had been attached to a wall or a pillar inside the peristyle hall, or inside the ovoid wall of the sanctuary, rather than to one of these buildings.

The plaque presents a six-line text in the Sabean language. The inscription was skillfully fashioned in relief, the letters raised above the background surface. The text follows the boustrophedon format commonly found among early Sabean inscriptions. Our inscription is complete, and nearly all the letters are well preserved. Only one letter /*t*/, i.e., the first letter in line 4 is somewhat malformed due to damage to the back of the plaque. The symbol for the god Almaqah appears in relief in the upper right corner of the plaque. Bronze was an often-used textual medium in South Arabia, and numerous bronze tablets have been found in Yemen.[3]

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We have used the following sigla when referring to inscriptions in this article: RES = Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique, CIH = Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum, vol. 4.

[1] The excavations in April–May 2001 focused on extramural architecture adjacent to the peristyle hall that Wendell Phillips excavated fifty years ago. For the earlier results of the current Maḥram Bilqīs project, see W. Glanzman, "Clarifying the Record: The Bayt ʾAwwām Revisited," in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 29 (1999): 73–88.

[2] The dating of these structures is provided by the *in situ* inscriptions engraved on their walls.

[3] On the technique of inscribed South Arabian bronze plaques, see J. Ryckmans (with collaboration of Ignace Vandevivere), "Some Technical Aspects of the Inscribed South Arabian Bronze Inscriptions Cast in Relief," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 8 (1978): 53–65.

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I. The Inscription

The number of the inscription is MB 2001 I. 20 (= Maḥram Bilqīs 2001, inscription no. 20). Its measurements are: height: 29.5 cm, length: 38.5 cm, the height of each letter: 3 cm, the height of the symbol: 8 cm; the spaces between the letters range from 0.5 to 0.7 cm.

The arrows shown below indicate the direction of the writing of each line.



Fig. 1.—MB 2001 I. 20. In this photograph, the first letters on the left margin in lines 3 and 4 are not completely visible. Photograph by Marc Deville.

Text

1. *lḥyʿṯt / bn / bʿṯtr / bn* ←
2. *ʾlšhr / ʾlwnyn / hqny / ʾl* →
3. *mqh / bnhw / ʿmyṯʿ / wmẓbʿ* ←
4. *ṯ / ḏhbn / bʿṯtr / wb / ʾlmqh* →
5. *wb / ḏtḥmym / wb / ḏtbʿdn* ←
6. *wb / yṯʿʾmr / wb / ydʿʾl /* →

Translation

1. Luḥayʿaṯt son of Biʿaṯtar of (the family)
2. ʾIlšahar, the Alwanite, has dedicated to (the god)
3. Almaqah, his son ʿAmmyaṯaʿ and the inscribed plaque

4. in bronze. By ᶜAṯtar, by Almaqah,
5. by Ḏāt Ḥamīm, by Ḏāt Baᶜdān,
6. by Yaṯaᶜamar and by Yadaᶜᵓil

Commentary

Lines 1–2 The name *lḥyᶜṯt* is an often-encountered personal name in South Arabia. It is a theophoric compound name consisting of the word *lḥy* and the theophoric element *ᶜṯt* and means "may ᶜAṯt guarantee life (for a newborn child)." The word *ᶜṯt* is an abbreviation of the name of the god *ᶜṯtr*. Such forms are well attested in South Arabian onomastica. The personal name *bᶜṯtr* occurs several times in Sabean inscriptions and in particular in Old Sabaic.[4] This name also occurs in Minean inscriptions.[5] It is composed of the name ᶜAṯtar, the supreme South Arabian deity, and the preposition */b/,* "by, through." ᶜAṯtar, corresponding to the Mesopotamian goddess Ištār, was worshiped in all the South Arabian kingdoms. The name *bᶜṯtr* means "by or through (the god) ᶜAṯtar."

Since Sabean inscriptions usually name individuals with a combination of the personal name, father's name, and the name of a tribe/family, *ᵓlšhr* probably is, in this case, the family name. The Sabean inscriptions mention several designations for "tribe, family" among them *bnw/bny,* which appears sometimes as *bn;* cf. *bn,* "son." The name in our inscription combines *ᵓl,* "god," and the theophoric element *šhr,* the latter designating a South Arabian deity. The word *šhr* by itself means "moon, month";[6] *šhr* as a theophoric element in compound personal names is well attested in South Arabian onomastica and particularly in Sabean personal names; see, for example, *ḏmršhr, krbšhr* in Old Sabaic. The dedicator Luḥayᶜaṯt identifies himself as *ᵓlwnyn,* "the Alwanite." It can be interpreted as a *nisbe*-form of the place-name *ᵓlw* (modern Kawkabān), the location of a fortress and temple near modern Šibām Aqayān, northwest of Sanaa.[7] Hitherto, the only evidence of *ᵓlwnyn* in South Arabian inscriptions is the early Sabean inscription CIH 570/2,8, in which a person twice calls himself *ᵓlᶜz ᵓlwnyn,* "ᵓIlᶜazz the Alwanite." The verb *hqny,* the fourth form of *qny,* means "to dedicate."

Lines 3–4 The name of a son dedicated to Almaqah is *ᶜmyṯᶜ/ᶜAmmyaṯaᶜ*. This Sabean custom seems to have been carried out only for those destined for service in the temple. The name is a compound of the theophoric element *ᶜm* and the word *yṯᶜ,* "help," and should be translated, "ᶜAmm has helped." The term *ᶜm* is attested in South Arabia as a name of the national deity of Qataban and appears frequently as a theophoric element

4 S. A. Tairan, *Die Personennamen in den altsabäischen Inschriften,* Texte und Studien zur Orientalistik 8 (Hildesheim, 1992), pp. 84 f.; R. Hazim, "Ein Typus altsüdarabischer theophorer Namen," in N. Nebes, ed., *Arabia Felix: Beiträge zur Sprache und Kultur des vorislamischen Arabien: Festschrift Walter W. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden, 1994), p. 96. For different interpretations of the personal name *lḥyᶜṯt,* see H. Hayajneh, *Die Personennamen in den qatabānischen Inschriften,* Texte und Studien zur Orientalistik 8 (Hildesheim, 1998), pp. 226 f.

5 S. Al-Said, *Die Personennamen in den minäischen Inschriften: Eine etymologische und lexikaische Studie im Bereich der semitischen Sprachen,* Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und Literatur Mainz 41 (Wiesbaden, 1995), p. 72.

6 A. F. L. Beeston et al., *Sabaic Dictionary* (Louvain-la-Neuve and Beirut, 1982), p. 132.

7 A. Al-Sheiba, "Die Ortsnamen in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften," in *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen,* vol. 4 (Mainz, 1987), p. 16.

in Qatabanian onomastica.[8] Even so, theophoric names composed with the name *ᶜm* are well attested in the early Sabean period.[9] The name *ᶜmyṯᶜ* is also attested in Minean inscriptions.[10]

The national deity of the Sabeans, the moon god Almaqah/*ᵓlmqh,* is the patron god of the sanctuary in which this bronze plaque was found; today the Awām temple is commonly known as Maḥram Bilqīs. Almaqah is mentioned as the lord of the temple Awām (*bᶜl ᵓwm*) in hundreds of Sabean inscriptions from Maḥram Bilqīs and elsewhere.[11] In addition to his son ᶜAmmyaṯaᶜ, Luḥayᶜaṯṯ dedicated the bronze plaque itself to the god Almaqah, which is designated here as *mẓbᶜt.* The present inscription marks the first attestation of this term in South Arabian inscriptions. The word derives from the root *ẓbᶜ* and has the *mfᶜl*-form with the feminine *t*-ending; it may be read as *maẓbūᶜat* "impressed, imprinted." In fact, the root *ẓbᶜ* is related to the Semitic root *ṭbᶜ,* which has the meaning "to sink, sink down, to impress." This root corresponds to the classical Arabic root *ṭabaᶜa,* "impress, mark, imprint."[12] Classical Arabic lexica interpret the verb *ṭabaᶜa* as *ḫatama,* "to seal, provide with a seal or signet," as well as *ṣāġa,* "to form, shape, mold, fashion, to coin, to work in gold and silver, etc."[13] In classical Arabic, both *ṭabaᶜa,* and its synonym *ḫatama,* denote the making of an impression in or on clay and similar material and also have the meaning "to mold."[14] In classical Arabic, *ṭābaᶜ* and *ṭābiᶜ* mean "to seal."[15]

It should be emphasized that the phonemes */ṣ/, /ẓ/, /ṭ/* often appear in the language of South Arabian inscriptions interchangeably, and the same word will have different spellings. This suggests that the distinctiveness of each of these phonemes had, at least to some extent, already been lost.[16] Some examples from Sabean monument inscription are: *ḥẓy,* "favor, goodwill," which appears as *ḥṣy;*[17] *ẓll,* "cover," which occurs as *ṣll;*[18] and *qyẓ* and *qṣ,* meaning "summer season, summer crops."[19] Also noteworthy are *mfḍr,* "measurement," which is attested in one extant Sabean text inscribed on a wooden stick, and which also appears as *mfẓr* in monumental inscriptions,[20] as well as */ḍ/* and */ṭ/* in the same word in the Minean inscriptions *qbḍ* (RES 2771/3, etc.) and *qbṭ* (RES 2891/2).

One should also note that the letters */ḍ/, /ẓ/, /ṣ/,* and */ṭ/,* can be used interchangeably; for example, the Yemeni words *ḥaṣab, ḥaṭab,* and *ḥaḍab* all have the same meaning, "firewood."[21] Imperial Aramaic and Syriac Aramaic also provide good examples of the change

8 Hayajneh, *Die Personennamen in den qatabānischen Inschriften,* p. 202.

9 Tairan, *Die Personennamen in den altsabäischen Inschriften,* pp. 107 f.

10 Al-Said, *Die Personennamen in den minäischen Inschriften,* p. 144.

11 M. Höfner, "Südarabien," in H. Gese, M. Höfner, and K. Rudolph, *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens und der Mandäer,* Die Religionen der Menschheit 10/2 (Stuttgart, 1970), pp. 261–64.

12 In modern Arabic *ṭabaᶜa,* "to provide with an imprint or impression, to impress with a stamp, seal, or signet, etc."; see also *maṭbaᶜa,* "print shop, printing office, printing house, press"; H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (Arabic-English),* ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca, New York, 1961; reprint Beirut and London, 1980), pp. 551 f.

13 Maǧduddīn Muḥammad b. Yaᶜqūb al-Fīrūzabādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ,* 6th ed. (Beirut, 1998), Muᵓassasat ar-risāla, p. 743.

14 E. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863–93), pp. 1823 f.

15 Našwān b. Saᶜīd al-Ḥimyarī, *Šams al-ᶜulūm wa-dawāᵓ kalām al-ᶜarab min al-kulūm,* 12 vols., ed. Ḥ. ᶜA. al-ᶜAmrī, M. ᶜA. al-Iryānī, and Y. M. ᶜAbdallah (Beirut and Damascus, 1999), pp. 4058 f.

16 Beeston, *Sabaic Grammar,* Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph 6 (Manchester, 1984), p. 8.

17 Beeston et al., *Sabaic Dictionary,* pp. 75 and 73.

18 Ibid., pp. 172 and 142.

19 Ibid., p. 112.

20 J. Ryckmans, W. W. Müller, and Y. Abdallah, *Textes du Yémen antique* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994), pp. 58 f., no. 10/1.

21 Muḥammad b. Makram b. ᶜAlī Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ᶜArab,* 15 vols. (Beirut, 1955–66), s.v. *ḥaṣaba;* see also H. ᶜA. M. al-Hilālī, *Dalālat al-alfāẓ al-yamāniyya fī baᶜḍ al-muᶜǧamāt al-ᶜarabiyya* (Sanaa, 1988), pp. 38 f.

in the Semitic phoneme from */ẓ/* to */ṭ/,* in, for example, Sabaic *ẓʿn,* "move, shift, decamp," which corresponds to Aramaic *ṭʿn,* "load."[22] The term *ṭbʿ* is also attested in other Semitic languages; see, for example, Biblical Hebrew *ṭabbaʿōt,* "ring."[23] In Phoenician inscriptions, *ṭbʿ* indicates a certain type of weight or coin; *ṭbʿh,* "imprint, mark";[24] and *ḏhbn,* "made of bronze, in bronze."

Lines 4–6 It is typical for early Sabean inscriptions to end with an invocation of the Sabean deities and of one or more rulers. The sequence of the present invocation begins with the god ʿAṯtar, Almaqah, continues with Ḏat Ḥamīm and Ḏāt Baʿdān, and then names of the Sabean rulers Yaṯaʿamar and Yadaʿʾil. Ḏat Ḥamīm and Ḏāt Baʿdān are epithets of the Sabean sun-goddess, who in the early Sabean period is usually mentioned by these epithets, rather than by the name *šms,* which is commonly used in the middle and late Sabean periods; *yṯʿʾmr* and *ydʿʾl* are the names of Sabean rulers. The name *yṯʿʾmr* is composed of the theophoric name *yṯʿ* and the verb *ʾmr,* meaning "(the god) *yṯʿ* has command." This name appears often in Sabean inscriptions, especially in the early period.[25] The name *ydʿʾl* is a theophoric compound from *ydʿ,* "to know," and the theophoric element *ʾl* and means "ʾIl has known"; this name is also attested frequently in South Arabian onomastica.[26]

II. CONCLUSION

The newly discovered inscribed bronze plaque from Maḥram Bilqīs is one of the best-preserved plaques ever found in Yemen. It is a significant example of the votive objects dedicated to the god Almaqah, one preserved as a dedication in its sanctuary for several hundred years. It is difficult, however, to date the inscription precisely. In general, it is more difficult to date inscriptions on bronze than on stone, as letters could be more accurately drawn on stone than on bronze. Nevertheless, the boustrophedon character of the text and the paleographical features of individual letters indicate that the inscription probably dates to the early Sabean period (eighth–first centuries B.C.). In fact, our inscription can be dated back to the fifth century B.C. with reasonable certainty on paleographical grounds and because of the actual content of the inscription, i.e., the names of the two Sabean rulers.

22 Beeston et al., *Sabaic Dictionary,* p. 171, J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions,* 2 vols., Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung, Nahe und der Mittlere Osten, Band 21, T. 1–2 (Leiden, 1995), p. 428; see also W. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez (Classical Ethiopic)* (Wiesbaden, 1991), p. 543.

23 L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament,* 3d ed., rev. (Leiden, 1974), vol. 2, p. 353; see also Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez,* p. 592.

24 Hoftijzer and Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions,* p. 420.

25 Tairan, *Die Personennamen in den altsabäischen Inschriften,* pp. 236 f.

26 Ibid., pp. 239 f.